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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FIUME

BY GERTRUDE SLAUGHTER

THERE was a time when our impulse was to cry out: "Let us have done with Fiume! The Conference of Paris has greater questions to decide." Yet there are no more troublesome questions tormenting the world to-day than those involved in the disposition of Fiume. The clashing of national aspirations with commercial interests, of a political ideal with a racial conviction; the measuring of a spontaneous popular will against the decrees of governments, of the ambitions of one people against the traditions of another, the Slav against the Latin, the East against the West:—these are phases of the conflict which has made of the little seaport town of fifty thousand souls a battlefield in the war for peace. We cannot escape if we would from the international significance of Fiume.

The chief arbiters of our destinies at Paris assumed a strange attitude toward the meaning of Fiume to Italy. In that ill-timed open letter which strengthened the reactionary forces in Italy and tied the hands of the liberals, Mr. Wilson appealed to the people over the heads of their government, as he had done before to the enemy but never to a friendly Power. His claim that he believed himself to be expressing the will of the nation was not unmingled hypocrisy, although the later disposition of Shantung darkened the light of hope in such a claim and dulled the Fourteen Points beyond recognition. But when the powerful Three discovered that they, or Mr. Wilson, had misjudged Italy; when they had failed to distinguish between Italian irredentism and Italian "imperialism;" when the people rose in unity to the defense of their government, as they had risen against the strangely similar appeal of Prince von Bulow in 1915; then, suddenly, the concern of the Paris Council for Italy's opinion was at an end.

It is conceivable that Mr. Wilson really thought that he had overestimated the liberalism of the people and that they were not equal to their task as he had imagined it. It is quite possible that he thought they would follow him, after his unparalleled ovation in the cities of Italy, as those volunteers once followed Garibaldi when he offered them only hardship and suffering, sacrifice and death.

But Garibaldi was not doling out favors on one side of the square while he offered sacrifice on the other. And now, when the Italians are wondering why they made it possible for Mr. Wilson to celebrate his victory before he had fought his battle, and a few of them are glad to remember, with Ferrero, that they never shared the adoration of this herald of peace, and the humorists are evoking the shade of Christopher Columbus to chide him for a blot on the history of Italy, it is conceivable that our President does not yet understand that, while his estimate of Italy was in the main correct, what he failed to understand was the significance of Fiume.

Five days before the armistice was signed by Austria and the Allies, while the armies were still at grips on the Piave, the inhabitants of Fiume re-established the government elected by the people before the war, declared themselves annexed to Italy and raised the tricolor over the city. The Yugoslav troops were at the gates:—not the heroic Czechoslavs in whose camp behind the Italian lines we had admired the strength and the fine spirit of those men who had freed themselves from the Hapsburg yoke and become champions of liberty—but the Yugoslavs—Croats and Slovenes—Italy's worst enemies, who fought in the Austrian ranks to the very end, winning special praise in the bulletins for the fierceness of their counter-attacks, who had been a part of the Hapsburg government and had lent themselves to anti-Italian propaganda from Vienna to the remotest corner of Dalmatia, and who, when the moment came for seizing the fragments of the shattered monarchy, were demanding every foot of Italy's unredeemed territory as their share of the spoils. The Yugoslavs, submitting now to the Serbian chiefs as they had before submitted to the Hapsburgs, were advancing upon Fiume, when seven of her citizens, hoping yet to avert the catastrophe, set out in a small boat over mine-strewn seas to Venice.

The little boat was mistaken for an enemy by an Italian Commander and narrowly escaped destruction. Arrived at Venice under the escort of the destroyer, the seven patriots were admitted with much secrecy to the Arsenal. But the Admiral was very busy. He was preparing for the transportation of the bersaglieri who were to occupy Trieste: and, while events moved rapidly, the seven citizens of Fiume were kept waiting for one whole day in the ante-room of the Admiral's office. During that day they must have had time to reflect with bitterness upon the terms of the Pact of London which had sacrificed Fiume, without her knowledge, to the demands of Russia and to wonder why, after the collapse of Russia, that treaty, out of harmony as it was with the aims of the Allies, had not been revised. When at length they were admitted to an audience it was to learn that the Pact of London forbade the granting of their request. Italian troops could not be sent to Fiume. In vain the seven argued that the aggression of the Serbians must be checked. Italy could not act alone: and the Allies, bent upon "compensating Serbia," were blind to the pan-Serbian intentions of the Serbian chiefs. It would have been convenient for Italy if the government could have argued then, as Mr. Wilson did later, that since Austria no longer existed, the Pact of London was not binding. But they lacked that originality of interpretation—being "bound by tradition." Admiral Thaon de Revel could only promise some ships: and for some time those Italian ships were anchored in the harbor while the Jugoslavs ruled the city from the Governor's Palace and the Italian National Council from the City Hall.

When I visited Fiume in the month of May the situation seemed intolerable. Outwardly, indeed, there was harmony. The Allied Armies were in command, khaki and blue and grey were everywhere visible, and the flags of all the Allies floated together. A review of all the troops celebrated now an English, now an Italian holiday, and the ships displayed their colors in honor of this nation or of that. In the Governor's Palace, Italian officers moved about through spacious rooms hung with portraits of Magyar heroes and, low-voiced and orderly, maintained the chief command. In the old municipal hall, stored with centuries of archives in Latin and Italian, the Mayor talked without any show of feeling while he opened before

us the illuminated parchment which he called the Magna Carta of Fiume. It was the decree of 1779 in which Maria Teresa declared that Fiume was not a part of Croatia but continued to be as formerly an independent corporation—*corpo politico separato*—annexed now to the throne of Hungary. Among the Italians whose houses we visited there was no deliberate propaganda and we failed to meet those "prowling patriots" who, we had been told, would lie in wait for us at every turn. We talked with some of the seven citizens who had made the perilous journey to Venice, with members of the National Council, with officers of the army and navy, with people of all classes in the hotels and shops and cafés and offices, and with peasants in the hills behind the town. The talk, for the most part simple and direct, sometimes covered smouldering fires of feeling and a patriotism that was disciplined by long-suffering and experience of defeat. We went across the river to the Croatian suburb, Susak, and there we visited delightful families, played with the children, and discussed, always in the Italian language, the hopes of Yugoslavia. We listened to the story we had already read in an American journal of how the Jugoslavs by withdrawing their troops from the Italian front had hastened the victory of the Allies. It was not, I remember, the ex-Austrian captain who told us that! He was quite too intelligent.

After many discussions with Slavs on one side of the river and Italians on the other it became clear to us that their attitudes were essentially different. On the one side there were definite ends to be gained and ambitions to be satisfied by the acquisition of Fiume, while on the other there were wrongs to be righted in the name of liberty or an injustice to be perpetuated and legalized by the very advocates of a new era in whom they had placed their hopes.

"What hurts us most," said the Mayor, "is that we who have preserved our independence through the ages—we who as a free Italian city have resisted the encroachments of the discordant peoples of the Near East—that we should now be made subject to a federation of Slavic groups who have given no guarantees of national stability and to whom we cannot look for anything but the old habits of favoritism and oppression which the Croats, as the tools of the Hapsburgs, have practiced against us for fifty years.

If you answer that the League of Nations will guard our rights, we ask why the freedom of our port for the commercial needs of the Jugoslavs cannot be guaranteed as well by the League of Nations without the sacrifice of our national and political rights. And if you call us impractical in that suggestion, we would remind you that the Jugoslavs would have twelve seaport towns without Fiume. Spalato, for example, is an excellent port, and surely it is for the interest of Europe that the new nation should have its orientation to the south.

"We are ready to co-operate with Jugoslavia. Istria with a stable government which we can trust, ought to be the meeting ground on which the Slavs and Latins could learn to live and work together in harmony. And at present this new nation is hardly a reality. It is torn with dissensions. The Croatians and Slovenes are opposed to the Serbs, who in reality are setting up a Slavic Prussia in the place of a German Austria."

When we mentioned Roman antiquities and Caesar's wall, the Mayor smiled. "There is no argument in our Roman origin. What ought to count for something is the continuous Italianity of the town up to and including the present time. We have *no* documents in our archives that are not Latin or Italian, and they pass directly from Latin to Italian without any interposing tongue. In 1449 when the city government wanted the people to know the price of fish they had it posted in Italian because not all the people could understand the Latin. In 1599 the Council ordered the magistrate to write all future acts in Italian so that everyone could understand."

Our talk with the Mayor convinced me that to give Fiume to Jugoslavia, or to place her by any compromise under the power of the Croatians, would be like ordering a certain town in the Middle West to obey the government of the Norwegians who have come there to find work. Only far worse. For that western town has not been an independent state, sending its consuls to other cities, maintaining its nationality at all odds against a foreign invasion to which it is now compelled to submit. Nor are the Norwegians of a different race from the established citizens, with a new experimental government just called into being from the camp of their enemies' armies.

The situation in Fiume seemed intolerable not because

feeling ran high on both sides of the river but because the armies of occupation, the British, the French and the Americans, were in open sympathy with the Jugoslavs and hostile to Italy. To the Italians this meant playing the game of Austria, their enemy, against Italy who had left as many dead on the battlefields of the Allies as England and ten times as many as America. It meant that those who were trying to reconstruct Austria-Hungary under a Slavic domination were treated as friends, while Italy, who had destroyed Austria, was treated as an enemy. This espousing of the cause of Jugoslavia in the disputed territory puzzled us at first. We understood the reason later: and when we had talked in Paris with Americans in full sympathy with Mr. Wilson and his open letter we knew how far-reaching were the misconceptions in regard to the Italian people, to their part and purpose in the war, and to their national aspirations. It seemed to us that while we had been watching the growth in Italy of a strong friendship for America there had been erected in America a wall of misunderstanding against Italy which could not easily be overthrown.

To the Italians, shocked into distrust by the action of the French in aiding the Jugoslavs to seize and hold the Austrian fleet, the reason for the unfriendly attitude of their allies was not far to seek. "The chance to exploit oriental Europe," they said, "is worth a fifteenth point which annuls the others." They blamed France and England most of all and not without justification. "All of the Slav markets" writes Charles Rivet of the Paris *Temps* in a recent book on Jugoslavia that is filled with bitterness toward Italy,— "all of the Slav markets are for us to take. We can furnish them everything. They wait for us—they even beg us to come. Croatia and all of the Balkans will hail our traveling merchant as a Messiah." The *Shipbuilding and Shipping Record*, an organ of the English merchantmen, has declared that the question of Fiume is of international importance, and that it is especially to the interest of British traffic that Fiume should not belong to Italy. It is the port which best serves the movement of emigration for the importation into South America of European workmen capable of working under a hot sun.

Contract labor! Foreign markets! The Italians had not thought of these things when they marched out singing

toward that mountain frontier from which the enemy, as their officers told them, could vomit fire as from a ten-story building. The citizens of Fiume did not think of these things when they placed themselves under the protection of "America, mother of Liberty," quoting Mr. Wilson's words, "Our goal is the revindication of the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world against the powers of autocracy and egoism."

The French and English press have constantly belittled the victories of Italy. Yet in the dark spring of 1918 the opinion was general that to weaken Austria was a vital necessity and that, although the fostering of internal dissension would help, nothing but a blow at her military power could dismember the Empire. In the following June, at the Battle of the Piave, Italy struck that blow.

It is not that, because Italy destroyed Austria, she should be given the fruits of her victory. On the contrary, what we should like to make clear is that Fiume is not to be looked upon as fruits of the victory, as the gratification of Italian imperialism, as a "childish demand," as a "crying for the moon" (in Clemenceau's words), as the equivalent, in Wilson's witticism, to the claiming of New York because 400,000 Italians live there. We should like to correct the impression so apparent in the liberal press of America that the struggle between Orlando and Wilson was the struggle between the old era and the new, between the old spoils system in national affairs and the new international democracy. The very opposite is the truth. It is entirely the will of the people that Fiume should follow her national destiny:—of a people whose sympathies were all with Wilson until he reverted to the principles of the Congress of Vienna, while Orlando, in his defense of Fiume if on no other occasion, was true to the doctrines of the Conference of Paris, Bissolati, the independent socialist and advocate of the League of Nations,—he who had called Wilson "*our* president, the president of the international democracy"—while opposing Italy's claim to the Tyrol and to a part of Dalmatia, has consistently maintained that Fiume belongs to Italy. About other "aspirations" there is difference of opinion, but it is by the will of the people of all parties that Fiume is claimed for Italy. It is a national conviction that goes back far into the history of the *Risorgimento*, to the days of the secret plots when, in the popular movement

for the liberation of Italy, Fiume was included with Trent and Trieste in the territory of the nation. And Mazzini, the prophet of international unity, declared in no uncertain terms, "Fiume is ours."

The rights of small nations has always been the ideal nearest to the heart of the Italian. The effort of the Dalmatian Tommaseo, Manin's colleague in '49, to realize that ideal by an alliance between the Slavs and the Italians, and the continuation of that effort by liberal Italians down to the Conference of Rome in 1918 is an interesting story. When Italian sentiment was converging toward war, the strongest of all motives in the minds of the people was the desire to avenge the wrongs of Belgium and Serbia. What followed when the champion of small nations refused to acknowledge the auto-decision of Fiume was not disappointment, it was disillusionment: it was not anger, it was loss of faith. The cause they had fought for was being forgotten in Paris: now it was trampled in the dust. "All sense of justice," said one of them, "seems to be buried deeper than the deepest grave of our dead." "Our four years of struggle," said another, "of moral enthusiasm, of agony! Does it all count for nothing?"

Fiume has become, in the language of the Italian press, "the title of a magnificent canto in the poem of the *Risorgimento*, a canto in which is condensed its most noble ideals, its hopes, its griefs, its ardor, its sacrifice, all subordinated to a single motive, the desire of a people to possess a fatherland; a canto of which every strophe ends with 'Italy or death'."

The Allied Council has decided that this canto shall not yet be closed. How it will end none can say. It is for the interest of Western Europe that Italy and not Austria should be strong. Meanwhile the disillusionment of Italy and her lack of confidence cannot be disregarded. Out of these things wars are made. And by these things the League of Nations must be tested.

GERTRUDE SLAUGHTER.